



Claytor Lake: More than a Wide Spot on the New River

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Imagine yourself on a waterbody that is more like a wide river than a lake. When you do, you will have a picture of Claytor Lake. Claytor Lake, a 4,363 acre reservoir, stretches northeastward from Allisonia across the Pulaski County countryside for about 21 miles to its dam near Radford. From popular Claytor Lake State Park, visitors view a sparkling lake, bustling with boating activity, with the top of Claytor Lake dam in the distance. A powerboat leaving the state park boat ramp can easily reach the dam and major coves in 10 minutes. Visitors who want to explore can ride 15 miles upstream to Allisonia, where the New River enters the lake (up to an hour's ride from Claytor Lake State Park). Claytor Lake is shallow in areas upstream from Lighthouse Bridge, the only bridge that crosses the main lake (Pulaski County Route 672), so be cautious if you roam upstream from this bridge. Near the midpoint of Claytor Lake, the only major tributary, Peak Creek, enters the lake. **If you are not familiar with Claytor Lake's key locations, refer to the lake overview map on the last page of this report.**



View of Claytor Lake dam from Claytor Lake State Park's boat ramp.

American Electric Power Company (AEP) impounded Claytor Lake in 1939 to produce hydroelectric power from the incessant flow of the New River. Claytor Dam has 4 hydroelectric turbines that produce electricity. Because Claytor Lake is a main stem impoundment with a large watershed upstream, water passes through more quickly than in most large Virginia reservoirs. As a result, Claytor Lake has different temperature and oxygen levels than other nearby reservoirs like

Smith Mountain Lake. Claytor Lake's temperature and oxygen levels are big factors for fishes like striped bass and hybrid striped bass that are stocked for anglers to catch.

When Claytor Lake was first impounded, New River fish were trapped in the reservoir. Fish that found Claytor Lake's waters a suitable place to live expanded their populations. Smallmouth, largemouth, and spotted bass, bluegill, black crappie, channel and flathead catfish, yellow perch, and carp flourished in this new environment called Claytor Lake. Most of these fish prefer shoreline areas of the lake. Under a cooperative management agreement with the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF), AEP maintains stable water levels in Claytor Lake between April 1 and June 30 to protect spawning habitat for shallow water spawning fishes like sunfish, crappie, and bass.

During the early years of VDGIF management efforts at Claytor Lake, fish were introduced to take advantage of open water areas. Species like trout did not do well, since the coldwater habitat they needed was not available. VDGIF fisheries biologists introduced alewife as a prey fish in the open waters. Then, they began stocking walleye to prey on the alewife. In 1996, walleye stockings were discontinued after a genetic study of walleye in the lake and the upstream New River found that a unique strain of walleye exists in the New River. Prior to this study, walleye stocked in Claytor Lake were brought in from other areas of North America. Biologists managing the fishery feared that these other genetic strains of walleye would contaminate the unique New River walleye strain that produced state record walleye through the early 1990's. Since 2004, VDGIF biologists have produced New River strain walleye in their fish hatcheries, so Claytor Lake is stocked with these walleye.

Starting in the late 1960's, striped bass were stocked as an additional predatory fish in the open waters of Claytor Lake. Annual stocking of stripers continues today. In 1993, fisheries biologists added striped bass hybrids (a cross between striped bass and white bass) to provide another open water predatory fish for anglers.

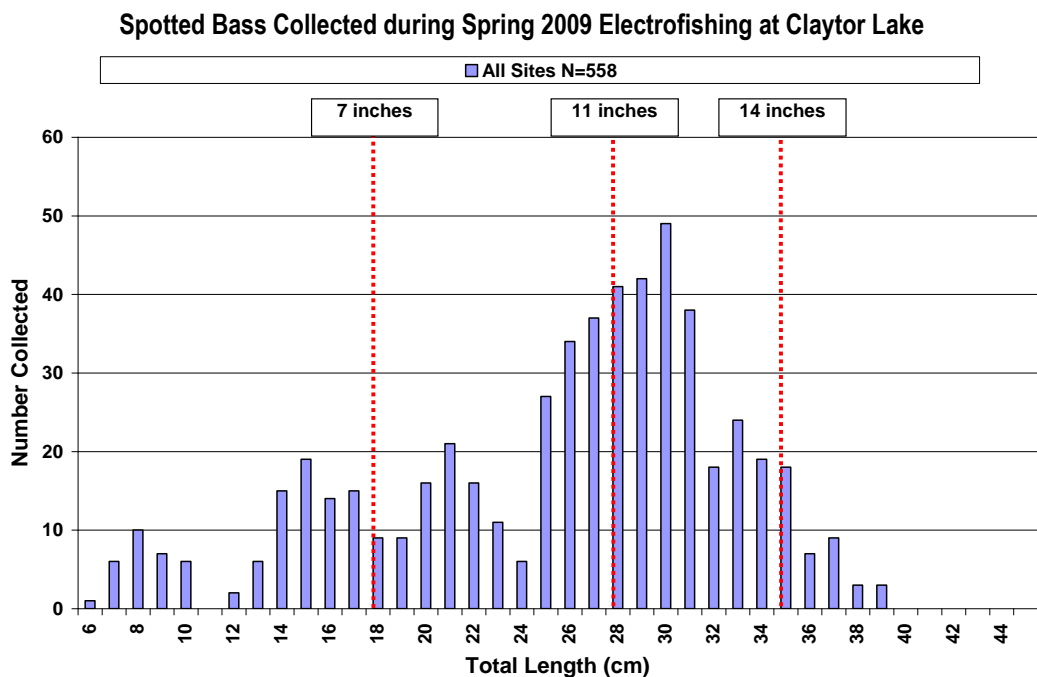
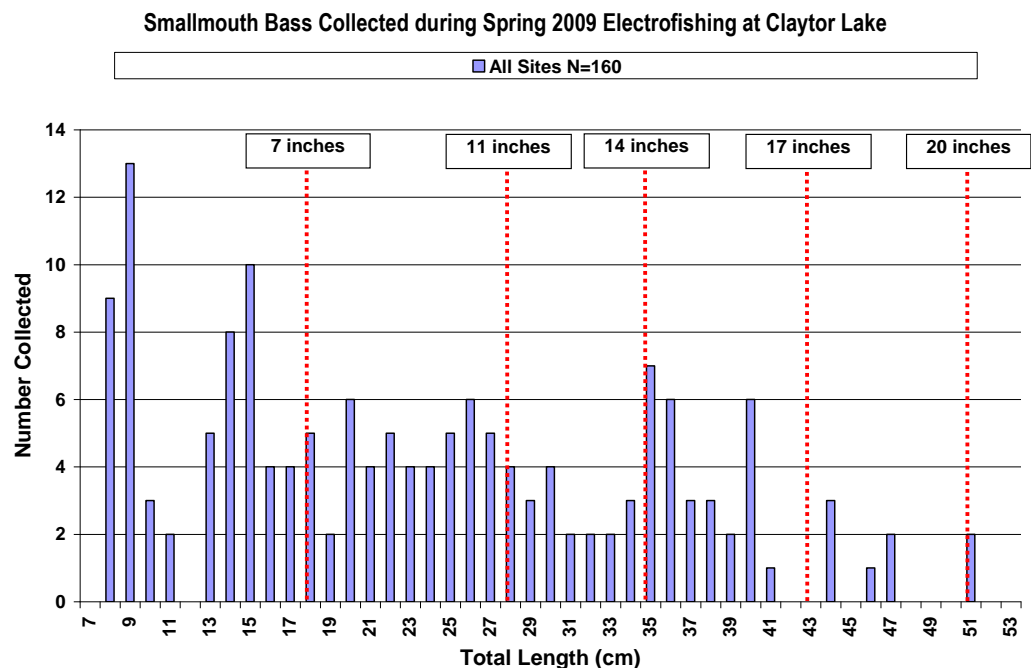
Claytor Lake offers something for every type of angler. Whether you enjoy working shoreline trees for bass and bluegill or trolling deepwater areas for striper, hybrids, and walleye, Claytor Lake is the place for you. Read on to learn about the mysterious waters of Claytor Lake and how to catch the fish that swim in them.

Black Bass

Smallmouth, largemouth, and spotted bass are the "bread and butter" fishes of this lake. Almost 50 percent of the anglers at Claytor Lake fish for these species. All three bass species in Claytor Lake are regulated by a 12-inch minimum size limit and anglers may harvest 5 per day (all three species combined). Anglers are encouraged to practice catch-and-release of trophy-size bass.

Claytor's steep and rocky shorelines create good habitat for smallmouth bass. In 2009, Claytor Lake produced 12 smallmouth bass trophy award certificates (more than 5 pounds or over 20 inches), ranking Claytor Lake as the second-best reservoir in the state for trophy smallmouth bass. Good areas for smallmouth bass are the main lake shoreline areas across from the mouth of Dublin

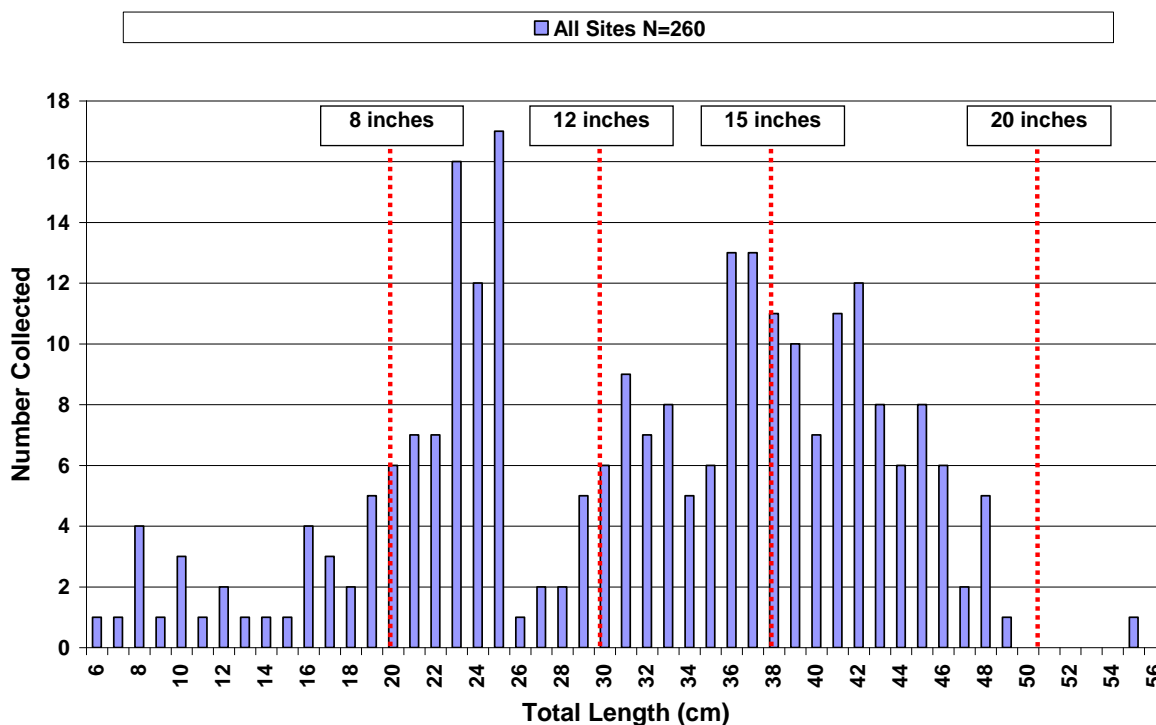
Hollow, the main lake shoreline areas between Spooky Hollow and Texas Hollow (two large coves across the lake from the Claytor Lake State Park marina), and in Dublin Hollow. Based on spring 2009 electrofishing collections, anglers should find good numbers of smallmouth bass from 14 to 17 inches at Claytor Lake in 2010. The future of smallmouth bass fishing at Claytor Lake looks good, given the number of 7 to 14 inch bass collected in spring 2009 electrofishing.



Spotted bass in Claytor Lake do not grow as large as largemouth and smallmouth bass, rarely reaching 2 pounds in size. Spotted bass numbers are increasing in Claytor Lake, so anglers will catch them when largemouth bass fishing throughout the lake. Most of the spotted bass in 2009 electrofishing collections were 11 to 14 inches long.

Claytor Lake's largemouth bass populations have been stable over the past 10 years. During spring 2009 electrofishing, 67% of the largemouth bass collected over 8 inches long were over 12 inches, and 38% were over 15 inches long, so anglers should catch plenty of largemouth bass between 12 and 20 inches in 2010. The future of largemouth bass fishing at Claytor Lake looks good, given the number of 8 to 12 inch bass collected in spring 2009 electrofishing. Anglers can find largemouth bass in coves throughout the lake, but the best area to fish is Peak Creek. Other good locations for largemouth bass fishing are Clapboard Hollow, Spooky Hollow, and Texas Hollow. The Claytor Lake record for largemouth bass was a 14- pound, 6-ounce giant caught in June 1991.

Largemouth Bass Collected during Spring 2009 Electrofishing at Claytor Lake



Anglers fishing for black bass in Claytor Lake can use information collected on bass food habits at Claytor Lake to select lures and techniques for these species. Smallmouth bass and spotted bass have very similar diets, with both relying mostly on crayfish. Techniques and lures that mimic crayfish are most likely to produce catches of these fish. Both smallmouth and spotted bass eat a lot of bluegill as well as some alewife and gizzard shad, so they should hit lures that imitate fish. Largemouth bass diets are quite different from smallmouth and spotted bass diets. Largemouth bass eat bluegill, alewife, gizzard shad, and crayfish, depending on the season of the year and whether these prey are abundant in a given year. Lures that imitate fish are the best choice for largemouth bass, but they may also hit crayfish imitations.

Striped Bass

VDGIF fisheries biologists maintain the striped bass population in Claytor Lake through annual stocking. Recent sampling indicates that strong year classes were produced in 2001, 2003, 2005, 2006, and 2008, so striped bass anglers should enjoy good fishing in 2010 and future years. The 2001, 2003, 2005, and 2006 year classes are all over 20 inches in length. The 2008 year class stripers will be in the 15 to 18 inch size range during 2010. Body condition of quality to preferred (20 to 30 inch) stripers in fall 2009 was good, with a mean relative weight of 89, which is consistent with relative weight values since 2001. A striper with a relative weight of 100 is in excellent condition. Body condition of these fish varies based on annual availability of prey (gizzard shad and alewife) and the quality of habitat available for them in the lake. Both of these factors can vary significantly in any year, since prey spawning varies from year to year and habitat quality varies according to whether it is a dry, average, or wet year. Dry years are particularly difficult for stripers in Claytor Lake, since their preferred habitat (suitable temperatures and oxygen levels) disappears in most dry years due to the lack of flow from the New River upstream.

Stripers can be caught year-round, although most anglers have their greatest success from late September through May. Water temperatures below 70 degrees produce the best striper fishing. Striper diet studies at Claytor Lake showed that stripers rely mostly on alewife and gizzard shad. Therefore, it is no surprise that Claytor Lake anglers experience the best success using these species as bait. Gizzard shad and alewives are most easily caught using a cast net near the back ends of coves. Peak Creek is a great place for finding bait, but don't overlook smaller coves in the lake. Many stripers are taken with topwater baits (Redfins, Rapalas, etc.) and bucktails in the spring and fall. For best topwater action, fish points and flats adjacent to deep water. Trolling bucktails in 20-60 feet of water can produce good catches.

During the summer and early fall months of average and wet years stripers “hole up” in the middle and lower lake areas close to the lake’s thermocline (50-70 feet deep), where they find suitable temperature and oxygen levels. In drought years, stripers are unable to find suitable habitat anywhere in the lake during the summer months, so they roam the lake in search of suitable habitat. During summer, stripers are typically located from the mouth of Clapboard Hollow downstream to the dam. When the lake begins to cool in October, stripers begin chasing shad and alewife schools around the lake and are more difficult to locate. If you see stripers chasing shad at the surface, you can catch them on top water lures. In winter months, look for stripers in the middle and upper lake areas, from the mouth of Peak Creek up to Lighthouse Bridge. Find the bait schools and you are likely to find the stripers nearby. In March and April, and during times of high inflows, stripers run to the headwaters of the lake at Allisonia.

Claytor Lake produced 20 trophy award certificate size (more than 20 pounds or over 37 inches) stripers in 2009 for the first time, ranking second only to Smith Mountain Lake (SML) in trophy award certificate size stripers (anglers reported 42 trophy certificate award stripers from SML in 2009). At least one striper over thirty pounds is caught from Claytor Lake each year.

Striped Bass Hybrids

Striped bass hybrids, introduced to Claytor in 1993, are stocked each year. Strong year classes were produced in 2000, 2001, 2003, and 2006, so hybrid fishing in the lake will remain a key

feature of the fishery. The 2000, 2001, and 2003 year classes are in the 20 to 24 inch size range. The 2006 year class will be in the 16 to 18 inch size range during most of 2010. Body condition of hybrid striped bass in fall 2009 was excellent, with relative weights of preferred to memorable (15 to 20 inch) and memorable to trophy (20 to 25 inch) size hybrid striped bass averaging 98. Since a hybrid with a relative weight of 100 is in excellent condition, Claytor Lake hybrids are fully packed and ready to hit your lure.

In 2008, the first year our trophy fish award program accepted applications for hybrid striped bass, anglers reported 9 trophy award certificate size (more than 8 pounds or over 24 inches) hybrid striped bass caught from Claytor Lake, ranking it as the top destination for hybrids in Virginia. In 2009, anglers reported 8 certificate size hybrids caught from Claytor Lake, continuing the tradition.

Striped bass hybrids are a hard fighting fish that are good to eat! Since they can tolerate higher water temperatures, hybrids often chase schools of shad at the lake's surface at night in the summer months. In the summer, hybrids are usually found between Lighthouse Bridge and Peak Creek (upper end of the lake) and between Felt's Hollow and Hidden Hollow (midlake area). In the fall, winter, and spring months, hybrids can be found throughout the lake. Hybrid striped bass diets are very similar to striper diets, so they can be caught using the same techniques.

White Bass and White Perch

White bass are occasionally found in Claytor Lake, but their numbers do not compare to historic levels. The best opportunity to catch white bass is during April and May when they run upstream to Allisonia, where the New River flows into Claytor Lake. Fisheries biologists sampling Claytor Lake recently discovered that white perch have been introduced. These close cousins of white bass are likely to become abundant in the lake.

Striper, Hybrid, White Bass and White Perch Regulations and Identification

Harvest of stripers and hybrids is limited to 4 fish per day (the two species combined), all of which must be longer than 20 inches. White bass are regulated by a creel limit of five per day, with no size limit. White perch of any size may be taken in unlimited numbers. Anglers should study the differences between these fish carefully. Identification information is available at <http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/fishing/virginiafishes/group.asp?group=2> or from our Department publication "The Angler's Guide to Virginia Freshwater Sportfish".

Walleye

Anglers can tie into schools of walleye at Claytor Lake. Some of these walleye are reaching trophy award certificate sizes (more than 5 pounds or over 25 inches). In 2009, anglers reported 20 trophy award certificate walleye caught from Claytor Lake, the highest number in the past 15 years. The improved walleye population is a result of Department fisheries biologists restoring New River strain walleye to the New River upstream from Claytor Lake. Some of these walleye return to Claytor Lake for much of the year, running up the New River on a spawning run in February, March, and April. During fall, winter, and summer months, look for schools of these fish in the same areas where stripers hang out. During the spring spawning run, look for walleye where the New River enters the lake near Allisonia. Read more about the New River walleye fishery here: <http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/fishing/waterbodies/reports/New%20River%20Walleye%20&%20Upp>

[er%20Rpts.pdf](#) . Walleye in Claytor Lake and the New River are regulated with a 20 inch minimum size limit and a 5 per day creel limit.

Other Popular Species

Claytor Lake anglers catch yellow perch in the one-pound range. In 2009, trophy award certificate size yellow perch (more than 1 pound, 4 ounces or 12 inches) numbers hit a record high of 22. The black crappie population is not large compared to other lakes, but they average a little less than a pound in size. Bluegill are numerous throughout the lake and many are in the 6 to 8 inch range, providing fishing action when other species are not biting. Flathead and channel catfish up to 20 pounds can also be caught from the lake. With catches of 20 to 30 pound carp possible, anglers from as far away as England come to fish for them at Claytor.

Lake Access

Claytor Lake State Park, located on the north side of the lake within a few miles of the dam, provides 497 acres of park with camping, cabins, picnic areas, and a swimming beach, as well as a marina. For more information on the park, call 540-643-2500. To reach Claytor Lake State Park, take the Claytor Lake State Park exit (Exit 101) off Interstate 81 and follow the signs to the park.

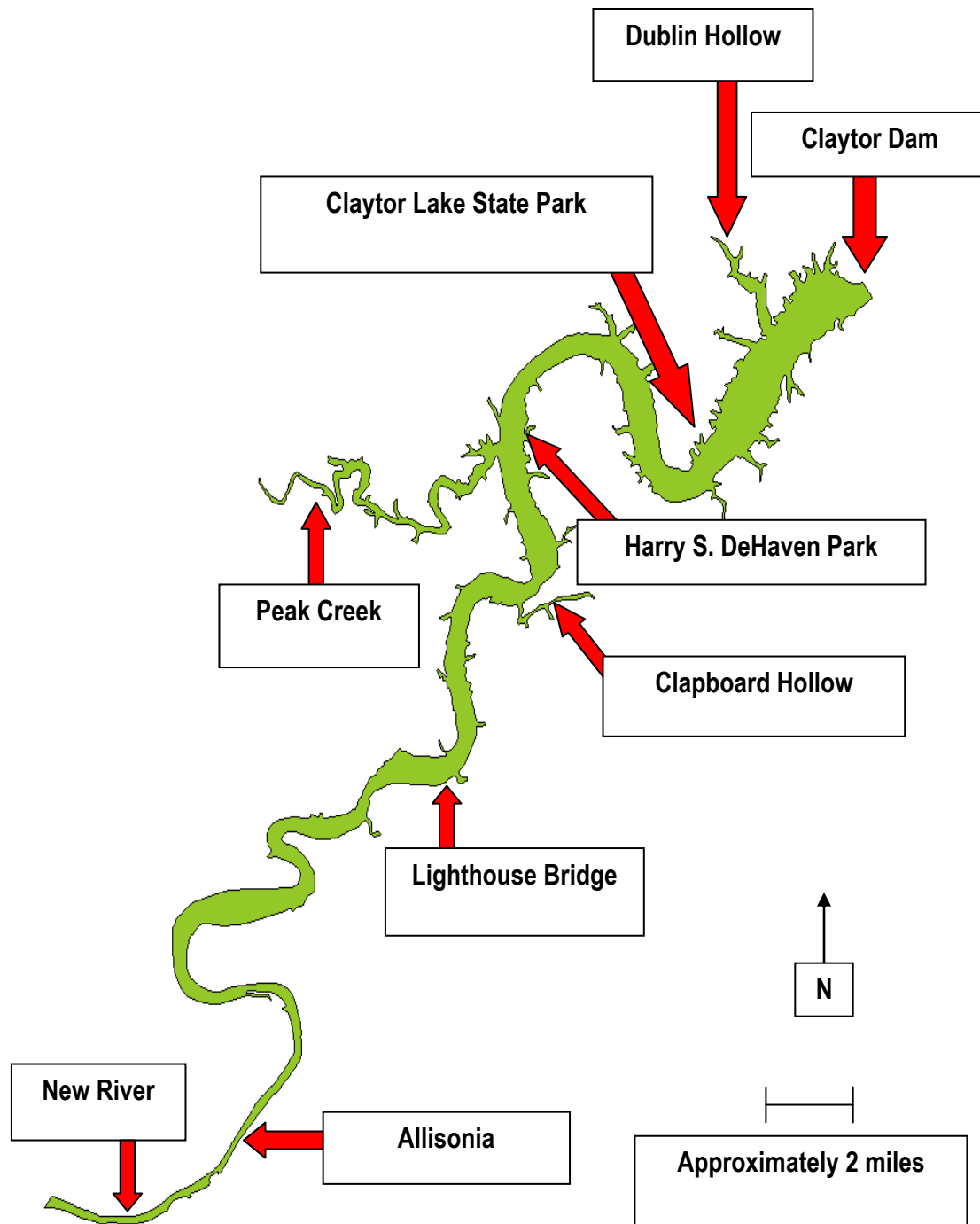
Boat access to the lake is available for a small fee at private ramps at Claytor Lake State Park, Lighthouse Bridge, and at Conrad Brothers and Rockhouse Marinas on the Peak Creek arm of the lake. The Department maintains no-fee ramps at Allisonia (in the upper lake area) and near the entrance to the state park (Dublin Ramp).

Harry's Point boat ramp, a no-fee ramp located in the mid-lake area in Pulaski County's Harry S. DeHaven Park, has a double ramp and courtesy piers. This park also has a handicapped-accessible fishing pier, where many of the lake's species can be caught throughout the year. During the fall and winter months, anglers are likely to catch striped bass and hybrid striped bass swimming near the pier. The easiest way to get to Harry DeHaven Park from Interstate 81 is to take the Route 605 exit (Exit 105) and follow the brown trailblazer signs to Harry DeHaven Park. From the Interstate 81 exit ramp, take Route 605 (Little River Dam Road). Follow Route 605 until you reach Route 663 (Owens Road), go right on 663, then look for signs marking the park when you get near the lake.

Maps and Additional Information

A commercially produced topographic map, sold by Friends of Claytor Lake, is available from local marinas and other retailers in the lake area or at <http://www.focl.org/merchandise.html> . Claytor Lake is long and steep-sided, so use a depth finder to look for underwater humps and points. Clues to locations of these key features can be found by looking at the surrounding land at any point on the lake. If you are next to a steep ridge, it is unlikely that you are close to any shallow water habitat. Look for shallow water habitat on the opposite shoreline from steep ridges. The old New River channel typically follows close to the steep areas along the lake's shoreline.

If you have questions, call VDGIF fisheries biologist John Copeland at the Blacksburg office (540-961-8304, mailbox 2), or email him at John.Copeland@dgif.virginia.gov .



Map of Claytor Lake showing key locations mentioned in this report.